

SEMINAR PROCESS

Seminar

A seminar involves a high degree of student participation in a small group setting. This format provides an opportunity to emphasize the substance of a lecture and/or assigned readings through analysis, synthesis, or evaluation¹. Seminar discussions are designed to elicit and exchange substantive information from previous experience and expertise. This dialogue stimulates the development of new solutions to problems as well as the identification of all factors that impact on policy decisions.

The seminar experience also provides the opportunity for individuals to learn about their own skills in leadership, teamwork, and oral presentation by practicing each of these skills in the relatively safe seminar environment.

Phases of Seminar Development

It is important to recognize that the seminar group, like other groups, tends to follow an orderly, sequential process as it develops into an effective and productive unit. There are different theories addressing this; however, most of them have at least some similarities. One theory has labeled these stages as forming, norming and storming, and performing, respectively. An additional step, not part of the developmental process, is the step of Adjourning.

Forming. During this initial phase of group development, members of the group are meeting for the first time, getting acquainted, and clarifying the goals and priorities of the group. A great deal of testing occurs. Individuals test which behaviors are acceptable and which are taboo. Much attention is focused on the group leader as group members search to define their tasks and their boundaries. Individuals are concerned about such issues as:

- Who are the other members in this group?
- What is the purpose of the group?
- How much commitment or investment do I want to make in the group?

Members are often polite, superficial, and uncomfortable. Discussions normally involve safe topics of conversation, war stories, and requests for additional information.

¹ Bloom, B. S., et al. (Eds.). Taxonomy of education objectives: Handbook I, cognitive domain. New York: David McKay Co., Inc.

Norming and Storming. Following the Forming stage, the group begins to organize itself. Roles, responsibilities, and task structure are addressed. Issues of power and competition dominate group life, and the mood can be highly emotional and rebellious until these issues are defined. As the definitions become clear, group cohesion evolves with a new atmosphere of cooperation, openness, and positive feedback. Individuals become more confident and comfortable with the group environment. Members address such issues as:

- What role will I play in the group?
- What are the group norms? Do I accept the role and norms?
- How much influence will I allow the group to have over me?

In some groups, power struggles and cliques develop, occasionally resulting in group dissolution.

Performing. If the group evolves beyond the first two phases, it enters into a productive working phase. Roles and norms have been decided, goals accepted, and tasks assigned. The task theme is problem solving. The emphasis now moves to an examination of how the group can work together most efficiently and effectively. Group members begin to work as a single unit resulting in greater productivity. The relationship is one of interdependence. Competition with other groups often occurs. The group exhibits cohesion, sharing of experiences, trust, mutual support, and open discussion when there are differences of opinion. Individuals feel free to disagree with others within the group, to take risks, and to share opinions and emotions of a personal nature.

Adjourning. The final step is Adjourning. This involves reflection on accomplishment and disengagement of relationships. There is time set aside in the SBLM Program for adjourning the seminar. This may involve recognition for participation, a time for members of the group to say their good-byes, or anything else the seminar members want to do at that time.

Frequently, at the end of the program, seminar members express the feeling of having gone through these or similar stages. Some pass through some of the above stages very quickly and others progress more slowly. Seminars can and do return to earlier stages of group development when new tasks are introduced or when changes in individuals occur. Awareness that there is a normal progression through these stages can provide the seminar a better understanding and appreciation of group dynamics and the learning process.

Characteristics of Seminar Learning

1. Sharing Ideas

One of the main activities of a seminar is, of course, discussion. Discussion is a method of sharing ideas with others to achieve a clearer and broader view of fundamental problems and issues. Seminars provide the opportunity to share ideas. Each individual brings certain understandings, information, and experiences. By providing an opportunity for all members to share their points of view, the seminar sharpens and extends each individual's own range of knowledge and understanding about basic problems or issues. An effective seminar requires the cooperation of all its members, all must talk together, think cooperatively; share knowledge, experience, opinions, and ideas in exploring a problem.

Discussion is not a method of argument or debate. It involves the critically thought out presentation of differing points of view with the ultimate aim of settling an issue or deciding upon a program of action. Discussion provides new sources of information, new perspectives, and helps keep us receptive. Through discussion, individuals can learn to analyze problems more effectively and to form sound judgments about them. Perhaps most importantly, discussion helps stimulate individual thinking and reading long after the discussion is over. As a result of participating in seminar discussions, you will find that you have learned to read more critically, that you are deriving more from your reading than before, and that you have gained a deeper awareness of your responsibilities as a leader.

Effective participation in seminar discussion can also result in acquiring new insights and skills. You can learn how to listen with a purpose, appreciate the other person's point of view, and develop an awareness of the many sides of truth.

Effective discussion requires shared participation. Shared participation, in turn, requires that everyone be given an opportunity to express opinions to the group. This opportunity is available only if each member is conscious of the rights of others to present their perspectives—and acts positively on that consciousness.

2. Listening

Listening is just as important in seminars as discussion. Good listening requires not only a sincere desire to understand what others have to say, but also a belief in the importance and worth of other members' ideas. You can

show your interest in, and concern for, all comments by devoting your full attention to the speaker.

Because communication is a two-way process, you must develop effective listening habits. Think about what is being said and relate it to the information contained in the assigned reading selections or the lecture. Good listening by all members of the group helps ensure the maximum flow of information and ideas.

When members of the seminar are talking, listen carefully so that you can grasp the full meaning of their comments. Give them the attention you would like to have and would expect from them when you are speaking. Do not start collecting your thoughts and thinking of what you are going to say next while someone else is speaking. Stay "tuned in" to the discussion and try to understand the other person's point of view. Look at the speaker, and listen for meaning rather than words. Imagine yourself in the other person's shoes and see how the problem looks from a different perspective.

Before replying to comments of another member of the seminar, be certain you understand not only what was said, but also what the intention was. If you are uncertain about what message was intended, ask for further explanation. Refrain from agreeing or disagreeing until you comprehend the essence of the ideas. Request the speaker to restate the ideas when the meaning is not clear, or restate it as you understand it and ask whether your statement summarizes the ideas. This procedure, particularly in a heated discussion, may make the speaker modify what was said and clarify the speaker's intended meaning. After making an honest effort to understand the comments, try to analyze them and given them perspective. Evaluate the comments on the basis of the overall idea. Do not listen to a person merely with the intention of locating some minor inconsistency in the line of reasoning, but consider the entire idea. Think for a while after the speaker has finished. Then, if you disagree, say so in a positive manner and explain why and at what point you disagree.

Through careful listening and evaluation of the other person's remarks, each member can contribute to the effectiveness of the seminar.

3. Sticking to the Subject

Effective seminar discussion also requires sticking to the subject. Occasional brief digressions are permissible and even advisable. In general, however, a group must concentrate on the main subject if it is to move forward to decision making or problem solving. The failure of members to stick to the subject may be due to many causes, but among the most common are insufficient information, inability to analyze and synthesize, poor listening habits, or lack of motivation. Whatever the cause for digression, each member should assume responsibility for developing those habits and skills that will

enable the group as a whole to concentrate on the discussion topic.

4. Shared Leadership/Shared Responsibility

The quality and amount of group productivity is not the sole responsibility of the faculty facilitator, but is shared jointly by each member of the seminar. Distributed or shared leadership affords all members an opportunity to develop skills, improves the overall success of the seminar, and disburses responsibility for the learning that occurs or fails to occur.

Increased motivation and individual development are among the advantages that accrue to members in a seminar where leadership is shared. In the one—leader group—the leader is frequently the only one motivated and the only one who assumes responsibility for motivating the other members of the group. When all members share leadership, they become more involved in the problem and assume more responsibility for energizing and involving other members of the group. All members have a greater opportunity for individual growth and development in the group process and in problem solving. Just as teachers often learn more than their students do, so do leaders learn and develop more than their followers.

5. Environment

Properly setting the stage for a seminar means developing an open environment or atmosphere in which members feel secure and comfortable. Effective communication in a group situation is largely dependent upon the established atmosphere or the interpersonal relations of the group. An effective seminar provides an environment wherein members feel free to express ideas that they deem important to the problem or topic being discussed. When there is an accepting attitude on the part of the group, individuals do not fear the possibility of being ridiculed or laughed at by other members.

Communication problems are minimal when the group environment reflects warmth, acceptance, and understanding. Of course, some individuals may lack oral skills and find it difficult to communicate their ideas. Generally speaking, however, the emotional reactions and personality dynamics of the group members can present more formidable obstacles to effective communication than an individual's inability to express himself/herself effectively. Those who listen frequently react more to the personality of the speaker than to the ideas expressed. Speakers who are accepted members of the group will not have problems conveying ideas to listeners.

If the group environment demonstrates poor interpersonal relationships, it may be the result of poor communication. In such an environment, people may be possessive of their own ideas, resist criticism, and resist the ideas of other members of the group. Other indications of ineffective communication are non-

receptive atmosphere, apathy, boredom, daydreaming, hairsplitting, or harangues over precise definitions or terms. When such symptoms appear in the seminar, members must take stock of their group process to find out what is wrong and decide what to do to correct the situation.

Introspection

An effective seminar also depends upon the participation of members in another activity—introspection. This is an important seminar activity that is often overlooked and mistakenly neglected. Continual individual analysis of goals and activities should be an integral part of the seminar program as it permits intelligent modification of the problem solving or discussion process at any stage. Some suggested questions you should ask yourself concerning your activities and the seminar group's activities are:

- What is my general reaction to today's seminar?
- What new insights or helpful ideas did I get from today's seminar discussion?
- What did the seminar add to the lecture, readings, or practical exercises?
- What value did I add to today's seminar experience?
- What would I like to change about the seminar experience?
- What did I learn about my own skills in leadership and team building today?

A learning self-assessment described later as part of the evaluation plan provides you an opportunity to document your goals, professional development, and intellectual growth. You can then review the document periodically in order to assess progress.

Seminar Organization

While at AMSC, every student will hold a position of responsibility in a seminar. The general duties associated with these positions are outlined below; however, the actual scope of the duties will vary based on the initiative and personality of the students and the seminar faculty. The only positions that are filled prior to the student's arrival are the Student Class President and Student Seminar Presidents. Students will volunteer for the remaining seminar positions during the first week of class.

Class President. The Class President is the principal student spokesperson for the class. The Class President attends scheduled meetings with the Commandant, Department Chairs, and Seminar Presidents. The Class President has the additional role of assisting the College in greeting guest speakers and in ensuring that students return to class on time after breaks during lecture hall presentations. This is especially important when the College

has guest speakers. The Class President has an overall responsibility for the coordination and conduct of class activities, ensuring a successful class for everyone. Of course, the Class President needs the full support of seminar presidents in all of these roles.

Seminar President. The Seminar President is the principal student spokesperson for the seminar. The Seminar President's duties include assisting the Faculty Seminar Leader in matters pertaining to student concerns, recommendations, and administrative matters; guiding the seminar in its participation in all non-academic activities; attending scheduled meetings with the Commandant and back-briefing the seminar students and faculty leader about the meetings; monitoring seminar attendance and ensuring any student requests for emergency leave are processed through the Seminar President to the Faculty Seminar Leader; ensuring students return to the seminar room on time after breaks and assisting the Class President in this function when classes are held *en masse*; monitoring the performance of seminar members in the conduct of their positions of responsibility and reporting concerns, if any, to the Seminar Leader; and functioning as the principal point of contact within the seminar for all matters in the absence of the Seminar Leader or other faculty members.

In general, both seminar and class presidents catalyze student energy and participation, act as liaison for the class with the AMSC leadership, and encourage student attention to AMSC's underlying operational rules.

Student Awards Review Committee (SARC) Representative. The SARC representative helps the seminar understand the AMSC awards and student participation in the awards program. The SARC representatives will collect, review, forward, and recommend the disposition of nominations for Certificates of Appreciation and the AMSC Alumni Association Leadership Award. The committee will select one of its members as chairperson during its first meeting. A member of the AMSC SBLM Awards Review Board (SARB) serves as advisor to the SARC. See AMSC Student Award and Recognition Program for more details.

Treasurer. The seminar's Treasurer collects moneys for group activities and coordinates the financial aspects of other seminar activities.

Fitness Coordinator. The seminar's Fitness Coordinator is the point of contact for all health and fitness matters within the seminar. This includes collecting fitness points from seminar members, and encouraging seminar members to participate in health/fitness activities.

Survey Coordinator. The seminar's Survey Coordinator is responsible for providing students with the times and procedures for completing student surveys. The Survey Coordinator will receive a 1-hour brief regarding duties

and the use of the automated survey system. Throughout the course, the Survey Coordinator will assist students in using the automated survey system.

Media/Computer/Supply Coordinators (*May be as many as two individuals per seminar*). The seminar's Media/Computer/Supply Coordinators are responsible for all aspects of audio visual, computer, and supply support within the seminar to ensure all audiovisual equipment is available, set up, and functional as needed for appropriate student-led seminar sessions and to ensure sufficient supplies are available for students within the seminar room (computer paper, slide frames, magic markers). These individuals are also responsible for providing assistance and training to other seminar members on the seminar's audiovisual equipment and for consolidating certain requirements on diskette for the seminar, including a seminar end-of-program CD-ROM. Responsible for collecting seminar and student requirements in a Seminar folder according to the Seminar Products Accreditation Checklist.

Mid-Program Social Planner. The seminar's Mid-Program Social Planner works with the other seminar planners in planning and organizing the class mid-program social activity.

Graduation Activities Planner. The seminar's Graduation Activities Planner works closely with the other seminar planners in developing plans for the graduation social and activities associated with graduation (excluding the actual graduation ceremony).

Activity Coordinator. The seminar's Activity Coordinator assists in planning and organizing all social and informal activities excluding the mid-program and graduation activities (for example, local area professional sporting events, theater performances, and dinner theaters). Depending upon the social event or activity, this may also require working with Activity Coordinators from the other seminars.

News/Information Coordinator. The seminar's News/Information Coordinator assists in planning, coordinating and assembling input for selected seminar/class publications. The actual publications vary from class to class and may include a class yearbook, newsletter and/or complete student roster listing names, addresses (work and home), and phone numbers.

Memorabilia Coordinator. The seminar's Memorabilia Coordinator organizes and coordinates seminar efforts to design and procure distinctive memorabilia for the seminar or class, if desired (cups, mugs, tee-shirts). This may also require working with Memorabilia Coordinators from other seminars.

Photographer. The seminar's photographer takes or arranges for the taking of photographs at social, formal, and informal seminar activities. The seminar's photographer may work closely with the News/Information Coordinator,

photographers from other seminars, and the College Public Affairs Officer. Students interested in this position should bring their personal camera(s) to AMSC. The College does not provide regular or digital cameras.

Resource Conservation/Recycle Coordinator (RC/RC). The seminar's RC/RC is responsible for ensuring sound resource and energy conservation is practiced within the seminar and is also responsible for the seminar's recycling program.

Community Project Coordinator Committee Representative. SBLM students traditionally “give back” to the base and/or the local community through a student-led community service project. The Committee Coordinator is responsible for serving on the committee that will determine the project and coordinate its implementation.

Additional Possible Seminar Roles. The number of students in seminar or the circumstances at the time may require additional seminar roles. The seminar, working with its faculty, may develop additional roles. Some examples are:

- Security coordinator for safety and security briefings and related matters.
- Transportation coordinator. A single point of contact for travel vouchers and coordinating transportation needs in seminar.
- Country Store manager for snack and beverage requirements in seminar.
- Scheduling coordinator keeps the seminar up to date on the latest schedule changes.
- Distribution coordinator for mail, flyers, newsletters, and other distributable items.
- CD coordinator collects ideas from seminar about the student content for the CD provided students as part of their exit package. Generally, we will ask for one class representative to work with the appropriate staff to develop the content of this CD, but seminars may want to think about that content early in the program. The CD will contain the program syllabi, selected readings and briefings, as well as other suitable reference material.